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THE

Modern Language Journal

Volume II

NOVEMBER, 1917

No. 2

THE DOWNWARD EXTENSION OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

In the beginnings of foreign language instruction in this country, the point of commencement was placed late in the college course, as a sort of finishing or top layer to the linguistic structure, begun with the solid and dignified foundation of Latin and Greek. Whether the plan was adopted as expressing the estimate formed by educational authorities of the relative importance of ancient and modern languages, or was based on the logic of chronology, since the modern tongues arose after the decline of the classical languages, or was possibly thought to provide the light and frothy dessert after the substantial and essential pabulum had been devoured, it was nevertheless the prevailing scheme in our colleges in the second third of the nineteenth century.

Then, as non-classical courses were developed, the choice of French or German was permitted in the Freshman year, especially in the scientific courses. But the perception quickly followed that the first two years of French and German could be quite as well done by the sub-freshman, and that much freedom was permitted in the choice of admission requirements. Thus the study invaded the preparatory or high school, to be commenced in the second year before graduation.

In that position it has remained up to the present time in many of the more conservative secondary schools. The choice of a modern language is offered to the pupils in the third year, (often only after the completion of two years of required Latin) thus

enabling them to prepare for the elementary French, German or Spanish admission examinations of the colleges. The advantages of this plan are obvious, as compared with the college beginning, for the work spread over two years in the high school, with comparatively small classes, is crowded into one year, or even one semester, in the large freshman classes.

Perhaps by this time educational authorities began to study the psychological aspects of learning a language. They recognized that many portions of the task could be done quite as well at an earlier age, before the active memory and imitative habits of childhood had given place to the more rational and systematic processes of mind. To be sure, the purely grammatical type of beginners' work hitherto in vogue involved more of the logical processes, but the large amount of forms and vocabulary to be memorized proved irksome and slow work for the student of the later adolescent years.

The desire to have the pupil acquire more than a reading or translating knowledge of the language studied, necessitated the mastering of a larger active vocabulary, a tolerable pronunciation and a feeling for the proper construction which was not dependent upon a few memorized rules. Then it was found that the newly recognized aims could be better attained by beginning the modern language in the first year of the high school. In many schools the breaking down of the requirement of Latin for all students left the choice of a modern language open to first year pupils, who, in competition with their older school-mates of the third year, showed greater flexibility in acquiring pronunciation and idiomatic constructions, though they were slower in mastering the grammar, in which they had had little or no previous training, even in English. Usually, at the end of two years, the younger pupils showed greater readiness in conversation, better pronunciation and more ability in understanding the spoken language; while the older students, having begun the language in the third year, usually after two years of training in Latin, and with the greater maturity and all round discipline of four years of high school work, showed greater power in translation, a more thorough knowledge of grammar, and the accomplishment of a larger amount of reading. This was to be expected from their greater power of concentration and prolonged effort. In many schools the value of this work has been greatly

enhanced by extending the course to three years, and in a goodly number of schools to four years.

In the period thus far outlined, all will agree that a commendable advance has been made. Some may believe that we have obtained all that we may safely hope to secure. But a comparison with school systems in countries that have most thoroughly organized secondary instruction will encourage us to make another advance.

The recent movement to begin secondary instruction two years earlier, either through an intermediate school, or through the three year junior high school, offers not only the opportunity to begin a foreign language two years earlier, but the recognition of the desirability of doing so. It has often been remarked that the French or German boy of 18 is about two years further advanced than the American boy of the same age. This is due to the better placing and correlation of work in the secondary schools of France and Germany and the absence of overlapping or of "marking time," for which our upper grammar grades have been criticized.

We Americans, with our popular insistence on the value of time, should no longer tolerate this waste. In our educational structure we have been using patchwork and make-shifts, tacking on a quaint but impractical room here, bending about some legal stump there, or erecting as a modern facade a factory front, instead of planning from the ground up a rational piece of architecture, suited to our needs and environment. In consequence of the fortuitous growth of our school system, the primary stage has been unduly lengthened, abstruse and difficult portions of grammar and arithmetic have been added to fill in the time devoted to the grammar schools. In many states the school law practically restricts the expenditure of common school money to the teaching of the "three r's." In such cases it may be necessary to amend the law before the curriculum can be enriched or very extensive improvements can be made. That a proper plan would effect a great saving of time is shown by a comparison with the French and German schools. They accomplish more thoroughly in twelve years what we do in fourteen. In our own country, where well coördinated and continuous courses have been instituted, a like saving has been effected, and our usual twelve years' work has been satisfactorily done in ten or ten and one-half years. (See report of Iowa State Normal College).

What are the advantages, it will be asked, of beginning the study of a modern language below the high school? Will it not prove beyond the powers of the children, or interfere with their use of English? A little examination of what is involved in learning the elements of a language will show that childhood is a much more favorable time than either the college or high school period. Gouin was led to formulate his method of teaching languages by observing the rapid progress in speaking made by a child between the ages of two and two and a half years. He considered that if he could acquire a new language as rapidly, his desires would be realized.

Childhood is the period of imitation and of most active memory. Not only are all the organs of speech more flexible than later, but the readiness to try new sounds and combinations overcomes many obstacles that loom large to the adult. In the high school, self-consciousness has become a serious hindrance. One who has been a member of the highest class of his school feels that the eyes of his little world are upon him, and he dislikes to do anything which might provoke a laugh at his expense. The younger pupil possesses more strongly the dramatic instinct—playing something, he would call it—and by this means makes substantial progress in speaking.

The organization of junior high schools in many cities, and of the departmental plan of teaching in other systems, would furnish a most favorable starting point, usually at the beginning of the seventh grade. While the most favorable time, in the child's mental development, would be probably two years earlier, or at about the age of ten years, yet considerations of economy of teaching, and the demands of other subjects, would make the beginning before the seventh grade impracticable in many cities.

The fear that the study of a foreign language would injure the pupil's English is, I believe, unfounded. On the contrary, my observation convinces me that proper teaching will greatly improve and strengthen the command of English, which is so closely allied to both the Germanic and Romanic languages. High school pupils have told me that all they ever learned of English grammar they obtained in the German classes. I believe that a large portion of the time spent on English grammar could be applied to the study of another language, without perceptible loss in English.

By extending the teaching of modern languages downward, two other advantages are obtained, the importance of which has been emphasized by many educational discussions. The gap between the lower school and the high school would be decidedly lessened, and also a material saving of time would be effected. An opportunity would also be given in the high school for the pupil to proceed beyond the elementary stage and to study works in the foreign literature similar in grade to those he is studying in English.

All admit that a knowledge of foreign languages is likely to become of great practical importance in this country. Yet we occasionally hear some one advise us not to bother about learning them until we need them. But it is difficult indeed for one who has had no training in foreign languages to learn one when mature. The scientific habit of mind is acquired by the proper teaching of any branch of science, making it possible and natural to take up the study of any other branch at need. Likewise the study of any foreign language makes much easier the learning, when needed, of any other language, and also sharpens the perception of the niceties, and greatly increases the knowledge of the mother tongue. I may go further and say that the ability to understand involved or broken English is increased by the study of a foreign language. The mind is made more flexible and adaptable to all new forms of expression. Even the study of ancient languages would better follow, rather than precede, the learning of a modern language, thus utilizing the well-known pedagogical principle of proceeding from the known to the unknown, or that which is near at hand to that which is more distant. The German schools using the reform plan have proven the wisdom of this order, as young pupils who had spent three or four years in French made such rapid progress in Latin that, by the end of the course, they equalled those who had taken Latin from the beginning. So, in our schools, a language so far removed from our own in thought and structure as Latin would be much more easily and thoroughly mastered in the high school, if preceded by two or three years of a modern language in the elementary school.

In conclusion, let me urge you to work for the extension of modern language instruction downwards at least two years into the elementary grades. Four or five years would correspond to the practice in European countries. But progress is made not by

leaps, but by steps and many obstacles must be overcome. I am convinced that this would be a most important and valuable step in our educational progress.

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